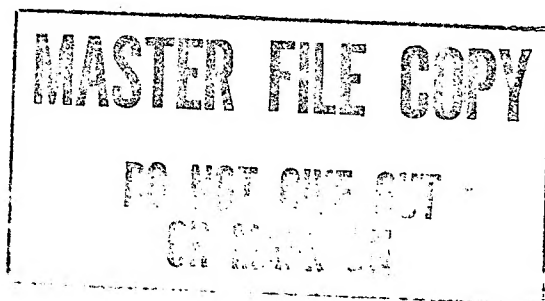




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Soviet-Iranian Relations: Moscow's Policy and Options

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An Intelligence Assessment

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SOV 83-10149CX

August 1983

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Soviet-Iranian Relations: Moscow's Policy and Options

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [] of the
Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and queries are
welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Policy
Analysis Division, SOVA, []

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Soviet-Iranian Relations: Moscow's Policy and Options

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 11 August 1983
was used in this report.*

The Iranian revolution presented the Soviets with both a strategic gain (the expulsion of the US presence from Iran) and the potential for substantially improved relations with Iran. While Moscow's primary objective—the continuation of Iran's virulent anti-US orientation—has been satisfied thus far, Soviet-Iranian relations have deteriorated steadily since 1982

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Iran's anti-Soviet proclivities have been reinforced in the past year and a half by the USSR's growing support for Iraq in its war with Iran, the increasing strength of anti-Communist Islamic clerics, and strong differences with Moscow over Afghanistan. Iran has demanded an end to Soviet support to Iraq and the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan; it has expressed its growing hostility in anti-Soviet rhetoric, diplomatic affronts, and repression of the Communist Tudeh Party. These actions culminated in the dissolution of Tudeh and the expulsion of 18 Soviet officers from Iran in May 1983.

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Moscow's mounting impatience with Tehran has been expressed in media commentary, private representations, the expulsion of three Iranian officials from Moscow, a more pronounced tilt toward Iraq, and military operations on the Afghan-Iranian border. Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko's unprecedented public criticism of Iran at the Supreme Soviet session in mid-June 1983 reflected Moscow's pessimism about the state of relations and conveyed an implied threat to respond in kind to Iranian actions.

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So long as Iran maintains its anti-US posture, the Soviets can afford to be patient. Tehran's political atmosphere is mercurial, and the potential for change is always present. The incapacitation or death of Khomeini could spark intensified discord, and elements more amenable to cooperation with the USSR might prevail.

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The Soviets, therefore, are likely to continue giving priority to maintaining correct relations with the Islamic regime in Tehran and trying to prevent further deterioration in formal relations. Their wish to avoid pushing Iran toward the West and the lack of attractive alternate options make this approach their most viable.

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August 1983

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At the same time, however, because prospects for improved bilateral relations are poor, Moscow may put some pressure on Iran to modify its policies. The Soviets could intensify criticism of Iran, try to rebuild the Tudeh Party underground, and support other leftist minority elements in opposition to the regime. They could increase their military capability on the Iranian border to demonstrate their superiority and will. []

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Using their current tactics of blandishment and pressure, the Soviets are unlikely to make gains in Tehran over the near term. The Iranians have made clear their intolerance of Soviet policies and are unlikely to respond favorably to Soviet pressure. While Tehran may see some merit to stabilizing relations with Moscow, the situation could easily deteriorate still further as a result of:

- Factional struggle in Iran or the public trials of Tudeh leaders.
- Increased Soviet operations against Afghan insurgents in Iran.
- Incidents on the Soviet-Iranian border.
- A Soviet perception that Iran was moving back toward the United States.

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Should relations continue to deteriorate, the Soviets could decide that they have little to lose. They might then try to build and supply an underground Tudeh, encouraging it to join the remnants of other antiregime elements to actively oppose the regime. The Soviets could manipulate the transshipment of economic goods and increase their military activities on Iran's borders in an effort to make their point. []

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The arguments against such a strategy, however, are substantial: Iranian opposition elements remain weak; the Khomeini regime is fanatically resistant to outside pressures, and the prospects of either ousting it or forcing it into compliance are poor. Most important, such a policy could undermine Moscow's overriding purpose—the maintenance of Iran's anti-US posture. []

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Outright Soviet military intervention in Iran is a remote possibility that could be triggered by US military action (or its threat), the internal disintegration of Iran, or the seizure of power by a leftist faction requesting Soviet assistance. We believe the disincentives to such intervention far outweigh the incentives. []

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Key Judgments	iii
Introduction	1
Soviet Objectives in Iran: Hopes and Reality	1
The Range of Soviet Tactics	1
Soviet Perceptions of Current Trends	2
Bilateral Relations	2
Political Trends	2
Economic Ties	3
Military Assistance	4
Iran's Foreign Policy	4
The War Between Iran and Iraq	4
Afghanistan	5
Iran's Ties to the West and Pro-Western Nations	5
Internal Assets	5
Soviet Options and Prospects	7
Maintaining the Current Approach	7
Increasing Pressure	8
Military Intervention	9
Conclusions	10
 Appendix	
Treaty of Friendship Between Persia and the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, Signed at Moscow, 26 February 1921	11

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Soviet-Iranian Relations: Moscow's Policy and Options

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Introduction

The fall of the Shah in 1979 presented the USSR with new opportunities to increase its influence in Iran and thereby acquire regional leverage in the Persian Gulf and strategic advantage vis-a-vis the United States. Moscow's efforts to improve its ties with Tehran thus far have failed—as evidenced by Iran's recent actions against the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party and its expulsion of 18 Soviet diplomats. This paper assesses the state of Soviet-Iranian relations and the actions that Moscow might take to achieve its objectives in Iran during the next few years.

Soviet Objectives in Iran: Hopes and Reality

Iran's strategic location adjacent to the USSR, the Persian Gulf, and Afghanistan as well as its oil resources make it a country of great importance for Moscow. Ideally, the Soviets would like to have a leftist, pro-Soviet regime in Tehran, supportive of their policies and intrinsically hostile to the West. They would pursue close economic and military ties with such a regime, hoping to acquire hard currency and oil in return for arms and economic development assistance. They would cooperate with it in encouraging leftist forces in neighboring Gulf states. And they would seek access to Iranian naval and air facilities on the Persian Gulf, both to support their own operations and to monitor and counter US activities.

In our judgment, Moscow's operational, short-term objectives are far more realistic and less ambitious. The Iranian revolution, by destroying close US-Iranian ties and denying the United States a base of operations against the Soviet Union, presented Moscow with a major strategic gain. Protecting it almost certainly is the USSR's overriding objective. Moscow realizes that efforts to improve its own standing with Tehran are complicated by its military presence in Afghanistan, which the Khomeini regime vigorously opposes, by its clear tilt toward Iraq in the latter's war with Iran, by Iran's internal factionalism, and by Iran's suspicions of the USSR's ultimate intentions.

The Range of Soviet Tactics

The Soviets generally have pursued a strategy designed to undermine US interests and foster close Soviet-Iranian ties; they have:

- Moved eagerly to Iran's assistance in countering Western economic sanctions after the seizure of the US Embassy in November 1979 and provided technical assistance in the development of Iran's industrial infrastructure.
- Declared their neutrality at the outset of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980, infuriating the Iraqis with whom they had a Friendship Treaty. (Their subsequent assistance to Iraq has undermined relations with Tehran.)
- Stressed repeatedly their desire for close ties and responded in relatively restrained fashion to frequently abusive Iranian provocations.
- Encouraged the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party to remain loyal to the regime despite severe repression, apparently hoping that this would improve Soviet-Iranian relations and protect Tudeh as well.
- Adopted a similar approach toward minority elements in Iran, tempering support for regional autonomy

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At the same time—using their diplomatic and advisory presence, Tudeh assets, and Third World nationals—the Soviets have tried to establish contacts, develop assets, and gain influence in Iran's institutions.

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[redacted] Propaganda and disinformation have been used to portray the United States as intent on overthrowing the Khomeini regime, to project the USSR as Iran's protector, and to discredit various perceived opponents. While such measures are designed to promote policies and people sympathetic to Soviet interests, they have provoked negative actions that have undermined Moscow's efforts to improve bilateral ties. [redacted]

Finally, the Soviets have used their proximity and military capability both to deter US intervention in Iran and to demonstrate their capabilities to Tehran. They have periodically warned against outside intervention in Iran's internal affairs; modestly strengthened their military forces on the Soviet-Iranian border; refused to acknowledge Iran's abrogation of articles 5 and 6 of the 1921 USSR-Iran Treaty, which gave them the right to intervene in Iran under certain circumstances (see appendix for texts of these articles); and conducted combat operations on the Afghan-Iranian border, which have led on at least three occasions to penetrations of Iranian territory by Soviet forces. Although such pressure reminds the Iranians that their superpower neighbor is powerful and cannot be ignored, it also irritates them and increases their suspicions of Soviet motives. [redacted]

Soviet Perceptions of Current Trends

The Soviets have been disappointed that their basically supportive policy toward the Iranian regime has produced no improvement in bilateral relations. Instead, over the past 18 months Moscow's commentary on its relations with Iran and its public assessments of Iran's foreign policy and domestic evolution have become increasingly pessimistic. [redacted]

Bilateral Relations

Political Trends. Since early 1982, Soviet-Iranian relations have steadily worsened. The USSR's growing support for Iraq in its war with Iran (reinforced by Iran's attempted invasion of Iraq in July 1982), the increasing strength of conservative Islamic clerics, and continuing tensions over Afghanistan have served to exacerbate Iran's anti-Soviet proclivities. Iran's

Moscow and the Triumph of Iran's Radical Clerics, 1981-82

By late 1981, several clerics whom the Soviets had praised publicly were in positions of power in Tehran (President Khamenei, Prime Minister Musavi, and Majles Speaker Rafsanjani). These radical clerics had triumphed over the so-called secularists (President Bani-Sadr and Foreign Minister Ghotbzadeh) who had been strongly anti-Soviet and whom the Soviets had criticized in press commentary. [redacted]

Reports of improved bilateral relations and an increased Soviet presence in Iran proliferated during 1981 and early 1982. While some progress was made in economic relations, no improvement in political relations developed and, by the spring of 1982, Soviet disappointment was apparent. [redacted]

attitude has been reflected in numerous actions, including harsh anti-Soviet rhetoric, delaying replacement of the Iranian Ambassador to Moscow for a year,¹ the low-level Iranian delegation sent to the Brezhnev funeral in November, and a demonstration and assault at the Soviet Embassy in Tehran in December 1982. In May 1983, after having arrested a number of Tudeh leaders, the Iranian Government banned the Tudeh Party, televised confessions of espionage by Tudeh leaders, arrested large numbers of Tudeh members, and expelled 18 Soviet officials, plunging Soviet-Iranian relations to their lowest point since the revolution. [redacted]

Moscow's frustration with Iran's anti-Soviet posture has been reflected in media commentary during the past year and a half. An article by Pavel Demchenko in a March 1982 issue of *Pravda* provided the first outpouring of Soviet grievances against the Iranian regime; it listed a long series of complaints, including closure of the Soviet Consulate, reductions in Embassy staff, and denial of access to Soviet journalists. This and subsequent articles have warned that right-wing elements close to Khomeini are trying to whip up

¹ Iranian Ambassador Tabatabai finally arrived in Moscow in April 1983. [redacted]

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Passage from Gromyko's Speech to Supreme Soviet Session, June 1983

We are linked by relations of friendship with Iraq. We stand for normal relations of friendship with Iran as well. The Soviet Union would like to continue to see it an independent state and has always striven for relations of good neighborliness with it. Regrettably, actions like those recently taken by the Iranian side with regard to a group of employees of Soviet missions in Iran do not at all contribute to the development of such contacts between our countries. In short, the USSR will act with regard to whether Iran wishes to reciprocate its actions and maintain normal relations with us or whether it has different intentions.

anti-Soviet sentiment. Although avoiding criticism of Khomeini himself, the commentaries indicate that the Soviets do not believe that significant improvement in bilateral relations will occur while he remains in power (see section entitled "Internal Assets").

The Soviets have also expressed their mounting impatience with Tehran through diplomatic channels.

The visit to Tehran by the Chief of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Middle East Department, the resumption of Aeroflot service to Tehran, and the arrival of the Iranian Ambassador in Moscow—all in April—appeared to reflect Tehran's desire to prevent formal

relations from collapsing completely. This brief hiatus in Iran's anti-Soviet activities may have resulted from internal disagreement over the utility of provoking Moscow. Iran's actions in May against the Soviet presence and the Tudeh Party, however, suggested that those urging an anti-Soviet orientation retained the initiative. These actions led Moscow to expel three Iranian officials in May and, to pull most Soviet dependents out of Iran in June.

Economic Ties. Moscow's dissatisfaction with the state of Soviet-Iranian economic relations was reflected in a *Pravda* article of 5 August 1983 which chided Tehran for failing to appreciate the value of Soviet support. Relations did improve in 1980 and 1981 in response to Iranian needs resulting from Western economic sanctions and the war between Iran and Iraq.² Bilateral trade remained about the same in 1982, although the number of Soviet economic advisers in Iran may have decreased somewhat. No major new projects were initiated during 1982, and Iran rejected Soviet proposals to conclude a new economic agreement in early 1983.

Iran, moreover, has been pursuing closer economic ties with Western Europe and Japan, which can meet its requirements for food, sophisticated equipment, and oil technology better than the USSR and Eastern Europe. For these reasons we believe that trade between the USSR and Iran will not grow significantly, although Iran probably will continue to import from the USSR the raw materials, machinery, and equipment required for Soviet-sponsored projects. These projects are in power and electrification, metallurgy, and agricultural processing.

In 1982 bilateral trade was about \$1 billion, according to the *Soviet Foreign Trade Handbook*. In January 1983, a high-level Soviet foreign economic trade official claimed that there were 1,600 experts in Iran. He indicated that the number was declining because these advisers were finishing their jobs and being replaced by Iranians.

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Moscow and Tehran have also failed to resolve numerous economic differences. Iran continues to curtail natural gas exports to the Soviet Union (cut off in 1980) because of differences over pricing. In 1982, Iranian officials publicly expressed opposition to the Soviets' insistence that goods transported on the Caspian Sea be carried in Soviet ships.

Iran's Foreign Policy

The Soviets have reason to be pleased with Iran's:

- Continuing antipathy for the United States.
- Growing contacts with radical states such as Cuba, Libya, Syria, and North Korea.
- Condemnation of moderate Arab cooperation with the United States.
- Opposition to Israel.

Nonetheless, they are opposed to two major aspects of Iran's foreign policy—its total rejection of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan together with its support for the Afghan insurgents and its stubborn refusal to make peace with Iraq. And they appear concerned about Iran's growing contacts with the West—and the potential for a rapprochement with the United States.

Military Assistance. Prospects for development of Soviet-Iranian military ties also appear bleak, at least as long as the Soviets are delivering large quantities of arms to Iraq and the war continues. The Soviets have continued to make modest deliveries of arms to Iran, but they apparently are reluctant to furnish larger quantities (and the Iranians may not wish to deal with Moscow either).

The War Between Iran and Iraq. The war between Iran and Iraq has created persistent difficulties in Soviet relations with Iran. The Soviets initially instituted an embargo on arms deliveries to both countries and announced their neutrality; given both their Friendship Treaty and extensive arms relationship with Iraq, this action constituted a swing toward Iran. Soviet ties to Iran did not improve, however, and an alienated Iraq turned to the West and China for arms. Probably because they saw little prospect of improved relations with Iran and did not want to become totally estranged from Iraq, Moscow moved back toward Iraq, lifting the embargo in the spring of 1981. In terms of volume and types of equipment, Soviet deliveries to Iran were extremely modest compared to deliveries to Iraq. The Iranians publicly expressed their displeasure

Moscow has been willing, however, to tolerate sales of Soviet-built and Soviet-designed equipment to Iran by third countries—North Korea, Syria, and Libya, as well as several East European nations. Moscow may see this as a means of mitigating its own refusal to sell and of creating some Iranian dependence on Soviet equipment.

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By the spring of 1982, the Soviets, convinced that relations with Iran were stagnant and concerned that Iran might win the war, signed a new arms agreement with Iraq. Their tilt toward Baghdad became even more pronounced when Iran invaded Iraq in July. Iran has denounced Moscow's endorsement of UN Security Council resolutions calling for a cease-fire and withdrawal of forces. In addition, Iran has condemned the Soviets for providing weapons to Baghdad and has frequently charged that the United States and the USSR are coordinating their positions. There appears to be little prospect for improved Soviet-Iranian relations so long as the war continues and Moscow supplies weapons to Iraq. [redacted]

Afghanistan. The Soviet presence in Afghanistan has been a source of growing friction in Soviet-Iranian relations,⁵ hampering dialogue and feeding mutual suspicions. The Soviet media frequently criticize Iran's attitude and argue that the insurgency is a creature of the United States, which is alleged to be simultaneously supporting counterrevolution in Iran. In late May 1983, for the first time, *Izvestiya* charged that Iran was allowing insurgents to use its territory as a base of operations. An *Izvestiya* article in late July contained a more detailed indictment of Iranian support for the insurgents and claimed these activities had been stepped up. [redacted]

Moscow has responded to Iran's increasing support for the insurgency by accelerating military operations on the Afghan-Iranian border. [redacted]

⁵ The Shah opposed the Communist takeover in Kabul in April 1978. The Khomeini regime not only condemned the intervention in December 1979, but it voices strong support of the insurgents, permits insurgent groups to operate from Iranian territory, and, according to Soviet media commentary, trains and equips some groups. [redacted]

Iran's Ties to the West and Pro-Western Nations.

Other Iranian foreign policy trends concern Moscow—largely because they might portend a turn back toward the United States:

- Soviet press commentary has criticized Iran for strengthening ties to Pakistan and Turkey, charging that these nations depend on the United States, which uses them as bases for counterrevolutionary plots aimed at Iran.
- We believe the Soviets are displeased with Iran's improving relations with many Western states, including Japan, Austria, Holland, Sweden, Spain, New Zealand, Italy, and Great Britain—and with its growing contact with China, which includes an exchange of delegations and the signing of a trade agreement. [redacted]

The USSR-supported radio station, National Voice of Iran (NVOI), has deplored the reported restoration of trade relations between Iran and the United States. And, in a *Literaturnaya Gazeta* article in June 1983, the Deputy Chief of the Central Committee's International Department, R. Ulyanovskiy, repeated the rhetorical question posed in an article in *Le Monde*: Might not Iran's repression of the Communists and the cold war against Moscow be a prologue to normalization of relations with Washington? [redacted]

Internal Assets

Increasingly gloomy commentaries have reflected Moscow's mounting pessimism about Iran's internal developments. Demchenko's article in March 1982 was followed in July by Ulyanovskiy's more authoritative essay in *Kommunist*. He warned that the revolution, while still ongoing, had begun to lose its popular character and that this could lead to a sharpening of class warfare. He stressed the weakness of leftist

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forces. Commentator Dmitriy Volskiy's article in *New Times* (January 1983) was still more pessimistic. He argued that the revolution had stopped halfway and accused Tehran of blocking land reform, prolonging the war with Iraq, and persecuting leftists. He charged that the revolution was at a dangerous cross-road and that its future depended on whether or not genuinely nationalist forces—including leftwing democratic organizations—could find a basis for unity. Most recently, in June 1983, another Ulyanovskiy article, this time in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, stressed the growing influence within Iran of the traditionalist clergy, who were gravitating toward rapprochement with pro-Western land-owning circles. He decried the ongoing offensive against progressive, leftist democratic forces (particularly Tudeh) and termed this a blow against the Iranian revolution itself. [REDACTED]

These articles reflect the increasing repression of the Tudeh Party over the past year and a half. Iran's moves against the party in 1983 were the culminating blows in a long series of repressive measures that may be followed by public trials and executions. The party, already weak and demoralized, probably has little remaining operating capability. Other leftist elements—the Mujahedin-e Khalq and Fedayeen-e Khalq—also have been decimated by repression; however, they have been unreceptive to Soviet and Tudeh overtures in any case. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] During its four years of relatively open operation after the revolution, the party apparently gained little strength. It was hampered by its allegiance to the regime, a position which did not appeal to young radicals; its image as a tool of the USSR; its stated opposition to Iran's invasion of Iraq in July 1982; and recurring repression by the regime. [REDACTED]

Moscow has made only minimal efforts to support the party since the arrests in February 1983. In addition to Ambassador Boldyrev's representation in late February, the Soviet central press has played down the [REDACTED]

Tudeh and the Iranian Left

During 1979 and 1980, the radio station National Voice of Iran, broadcasting from Baku and run by the USSR, urged Tudeh to establish contacts with the Mujahedin-e Khalq and the Fedayeen-e Khalq. These two leftist parties had played a major role in the Iranian revolution, [REDACTED]

When both the Mujahedin-e Khalq and Fedayeen-e Khalq opted for armed opposition to the regime in 1980, Moscow and Tudeh criticized them, arguing that their actions would provoke repression and the destruction of all leftist forces. One faction of the Fedayeen-e Khalq broke with the parent group and formed a loose alliance with the Tudeh in late 1980. In all probability, it too has been decimated by the regime's harshly repressive measures in recent months. [REDACTED]

charges against Tudeh (including that of providing information to the USSR) and asserted that the party is loyal to the regime. [REDACTED]

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Moscow probably expects, however, that its current strategy is unlikely to achieve significant positive gains. The Soviets have little to offer Iran politically that it has not already rejected. Moscow can continue to offer transshipment services, participate in development projects, and sell Iran technology and equipment—so long as Tehran is able and willing to pay. Iran appears to have no interest in expanding this relationship, however, and existing ties have brought the USSR little political benefit in any case. There is little prospect for expanded military ties so long as the war between Iran and Iraq continues. When the war finally ends, Iran probably will maintain its preference for dealing with the Third World and Europe—although it is possible that it will be tempted by attractive Soviet and East European arrangements for barter and rapid acquisition of equipment.

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Soviet Options and Prospects

The Soviets have various options from which to choose as they pursue their objectives in Iran:

- They can continue their current approach, a mix of blandishment and pressure, hoping to prevent any Iranian move back toward the United States and, eventually, to improve relations with the regime.
- They can reverse this approach, abandoning efforts to cooperate with the Islamic regime and putting their emphasis on efforts to destabilize it.
- They can decide that radical action, even direct military intervention, is warranted and plausible.

Moscow's continuation of attempts to pressure Tehran are unlikely to evoke a more responsive policy. Soviet moves during the past year have had little success, and, so long as Moscow maintains its desire for improved relations, such tactics must remain limited.

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Moscow could vary or marginally intensify its criticism of Iran, try to rebuild the Tudeh Party underground, and support Tudeh as well as other leftist elements in preparations for antiregime activities. It could increase its rhetorical support for minority rights, encourage minorities to increase criticism of Tehran, and reestablish ties to the Kurdish Democratic Party, again in anticipation of eventual cooperative action against Tehran. NVOI has again raised the sensitive Kurdish issue; its approach has been to criticize certain government officials for ignoring Khomeini's guidelines about cultural autonomy.

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Maintaining the Current Approach

In our judgment, maintaining legitimate bilateral relations with Tehran while continuing pressure on it remains Moscow's most attractive option. The Soviets' principal objective in Iran remains the same: to maintain the Khomeini regime's strongly anti-US stance. Continuation of Moscow's current approach will not jeopardize this gain. Moreover, because Moscow's assets in Iran have been decimated, the chances for the success of other strategies are poor. While Moscow clearly is not optimistic about the evolution of the Khomeini regime, it just as clearly does not believe that pro-Soviet leftist elements are in a position to mount a successful challenge.

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Moscow and Iran's Minorities

Over the years, Moscow has tried to exploit Iranian minorities to gain information and establish influence near the borders of the USSR. It has voiced sympathy for minority autonomy in its press commentary to maintain credibility with these groups and, presumably, to place some pressure on the Tehran government. [redacted]

Soviet relationships with the Azarbayjan and Kurdish Democratic Parties (ADP and KDP) have been historically close. Moscow established short-lived people's republics in Iranian Azarbayjan and Kurdistan in 1945 and 1946. The ADP and KDP were the vehicles of Soviet influence, and many members of these groups fled to the USSR in 1946; many of them or their families still remain in the USSR. In 1980, when the KDP led by Qasemlu adopted a policy of armed confrontation with the regime, Moscow and Tudeh accused it of treason. The ADP, closer to Tudeh than KDP, has not been as openly hostile to the regime, but presumably has been severely repressed during the past year. [redacted]

[redacted]

Finally, the Soviets could increase military pressure by building up their capability on the Iranian border and taking action designed to demonstrate their will.

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[redacted] several unauthorized incursions of Iranian airspace by Soviet aircraft occurred in March and April 1983. These may have been inadvertent, but the Iranians protested, warning that they would act against them. Moscow could intentionally conduct such overflights to demonstrate its superiority and increase pressure on the Iranian-Afghan border.

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Given Iran's current leadership, Moscow will have to evaluate these tactics carefully. The leaders' xenophobia, nationalism, and Islamic fundamentalism have tended to push them toward resistance, not compliance; Moscow certainly wants to avoid replacing the United States as Iran's prime enemy [redacted]

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For the foreseeable future, advances based on Moscow's current mix of tactics appear unlikely. But Iran's political atmosphere is mercurial, and the potential for change is always present. The incapacitation or death of Khomeini could spark intensified discord among Iran's clerics, and it is possible that elements amenable to cooperation with the USSR would prevail. While this certainly is the course the Soviets prefer, their commentary indicates their belief that rightwing, traditional clergy are becoming entrenched in the leadership and that prospects for favorable bilateral developments will remain poor even after Khomeini's departure. [redacted]

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Increasing Pressure

Moscow could decide that its prospects for gain with the Iranian regime are so poor that it would be better served by abandoning its efforts to keep ties stable, making destabilization and overthrow of the regime its main priority. It might expect that this approach

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would divert Iran from its war with Iraq, its support of the Afghan insurgents, and export of the revolution. This decision could result from:

- Continuing deterioration in relations and a belief that Iran will retain its anti-US paranoia no matter what the USSR does.
- A change in Iran's leadership, which would produce an even more anti-Soviet regime.
- An Iranian military breakthrough in Iraq and a more aggressive push to export revolution.
- A Soviet perception that improvement in US-Iranian relations was occurring. []

Moscow could intensify efforts to rebuild an underground Tudeh and to strengthen other leftist groups that actively opposed the regime. The probability that Tudeh members did not turn in their weapons as the regime demanded in 1979 and 1980 is supported by Iranian Government charges in May 1983 that Tudeh had established arms caches. Some contingency plans for resistance and, possibly, active opposition may exist— []

[] The Soviets might calculate that a Communist Party actively opposing the regime would prove attractive to disenfranchised Iranians and, over the long term, would have a better chance of building an effective leftist opposition. Because Tudeh has lost any chance of coming to power legitimately, the Soviets' adoption of this tactic seems more likely. []

Moscow also might decide to provide material support to minority elements opposing the regime. It could reestablish close ties with the Kurdish Democratic Party, encourage the remnants of the Azarbayjan Democratic Party to move into opposition, and provide encouragement to Baluchi separatists. This connection would improve the minorities' capabilities to harass the regime. []

The Soviets also could exert considerable economic pressure on Iran. They could delay or halt their economic assistance projects. []

[] The USSR could also threaten to curtail its services as a major transshipment point for Iranian goods. []

The Soviets could complement these efforts with increased military pressure. They could issue threatening statements, conduct exercises near Iranian borders, bring their forces on the border to a greater degree of readiness, increase their military support for Iraq, and implement a policy of frequent cross-border operations from Afghanistan and air penetrations from their own territory. []

Given the popular support for the Khomeini regime, which fanatically resists outside pressures, such a policy has little short-term prospect of either ousting the regime or forcing it into compliance. Even more important, in our judgment, the risks that the Soviets would face from implementing this policy are overwhelming. It could lead to the USSR's replacing the United States as prime enemy and could bolster any elements within Iran who believe that some ties to the United States would be useful in countering the Soviet threat. Such developments would undermine the USSR's most important short-term objective. []

Military Intervention

Several developments could prompt the Soviets to consider military intervention in Iran. Various Soviet and East European officials have indicated [] that if US military forces were to move into Iran, the Soviets might make a counter-move. In our judgment, it is possible that Moscow would move preemptively if it thought US action was imminent. The collapse of the Tehran government, threatening prolonged chaos or civil war and disruption in Soviet-Iranian border areas, could lead Moscow to introduce armed force, at least in those areas. Finally, although it is increasingly unlikely, seizure of power by a leftist faction that asked assistance from the USSR could result in Soviet military personnel entering Iran. Articles 5 and 6 of the 1921 treaty would provide a legal pretext for intervention in any of these cases (see appendix). While Iran has repudiated these articles, Moscow has refused to acknowledge their abrogation. []

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Moscow maintains substantial military forces along Iran's borders, giving it the ability to intervene, as well as leverage with Iran and influence over US decisions about policies toward Iran. We believe that Soviet forces opposite Iran are sufficient, if mobilized, to invade that country in the face of only Iranian opposition.⁹ We also believe that the Soviets, since at least 1980 or 1981, have been developing contingency plans for countering US ground forces by making a military drive toward the Persian Gulf. In spite of such planning, there have been only modest increases in the readiness status and equipment inventories of Soviet combat forces in the region since the Iranian revolution, and the level of activity of these forces remains routine.

There are substantial incentives for the Soviet military to move into Iran. Control of Iran would give Moscow access to that nation's energy resources and to the Persian Gulf, a major strategic gain vis-a-vis the United States, an enhanced ability to put pressure on the oil-rich Gulf states, and the means to end Iran's support for the Afghan insurgents. Moscow might see a more limited move—seizure of northwest Iran (Azarbayjan)—as a means of ensuring against potential security problems on its own side of the border, as well as bolstering its ability to put pressure on the Tehran government.

The disincentives to military intervention are major, however, and we believe that they far outweigh the incentives. Such moves would directly challenge vital Western interests and could lead to a major confrontation with the United States. Moreover, Iran's rugged terrain and poor transportation network would make a campaign difficult, and the Soviets could expect severe problems in pacifying the population and maintaining occupation forces. Iran's strong and successful response to invasion by Iraq, as well as the USSR's own problem in Afghanistan, have probably

⁹ In addition to the equivalent of about six divisions in Afghanistan, the Soviets have 24 divisions—only one of which is maintained at full strength—in the military districts north of Iran. We believe that a full-scale invasion of Iran would require some 20 Soviet divisions and at least a month of preparation. An invasion with a limited objective, such as Azarbayjan, could be launched by about five to seven divisions after two to three weeks of preparation.

strengthened the Soviets' appreciation of the disincentives. A Soviet invasion of Iran presumably would promote US–West European–Chinese cohesion, could lead to a major Western military presence in the Persian Gulf, and would strain Soviet relations in the Third World, particularly in the Islamic countries of the Middle East.

Conclusions

So long as Iran's policy toward the USSR remains within tolerable limits and Iran maintains its anti-US posture, Moscow almost certainly will continue to emphasize the pursuit of improved bilateral relations. The rationale for military intervention is lacking, and the disincentives to such action are severe. A policy of subversion or overthrow of the regime is unlikely to succeed because of inadequate assets. Failure in such a course, furthermore, would seriously damage existing and future Soviet relations with Tehran; it might also push Tehran closer to the West and even toward better relations with the United States.

At the same time, however, because the Soviets do not expect significant improvement in bilateral relations, we believe they will continue to advance their other interests—support for Iraq and action against Afghan insurgents operating on Iranian territory—unconcerned about antagonizing Tehran. For its part, Tehran may undertake further anti-Soviet actions, such as public trials of Tudeh leaders. A continuing downward spiral in Soviet-Iranian relations is likely.

Neither country will gain from continued deteriorating relations, however, and each would benefit from stabilization. Iran and the USSR might therefore arrest this decline and establish a less acrimonious environment for conducting policy. Even so, mutual antipathy and suspicion almost certainly will prevent establishment of close ties for the next few years.

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Appendix**Treaty of Friendship Between Persia
and the Russian Soviet Federated
Socialist Republic, Signed at Moscow,
26 February 1921****Article 5**

The two high contracting parties undertake

(1) To prohibit the formation or presence within their respective territories of any organizations or groups or persons, irrespective of the name by which they are known, whose object is to engage in acts of hostility against Persia or Russia, or against the allies of Russia. They will likewise prohibit the formation of armed troops within their respective territories with the aforementioned object.

(2) Not to allow a third party or any organization, whatever it be called, which is hostile to the other contracting party, to import or to convey in transit across their countries material which can be used against the other party.

(3) To prevent by all means in their power the presence within their territories or within the territories of their allies of all armies or forces of a third party in cases in which the presence of such forces would be regarded as a menace to the frontiers, interest, or safety of the other contracting party.

Article 6

If a third party should attempt to carry out a policy of usurpation by means of armed intervention in Persia, or such power should desire to use Persian territory as a base of operations against Russia, or if a foreign power should threaten the frontiers of Federal Russia or those of its allies, and if the Persian Government should not be able to put a stop to such menace after having been once called upon to do so by Russia, Russia shall have the right to advance her troops into the Persian interior for the purpose of carrying out the military operations necessary for its defense. Russia undertakes, however, to withdraw her troops from Persian territory as soon as the danger has been removed.

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